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Journal of Scientific Exploration, Vol. 31, No. 2 - Annie Jacobsen's *Phenomena*: A Commentary - **Sonali Bhatt Marwaha**

Annie Jacobsen's (2017) book *Phenomena* says it is a "definitive history of the military's decades-long investigation into mental powers and phenomena." The Star Gate program (last of several nicknames) is the *only* extensive U.S. government–sponsored psi program. However, there are far too many errors in Jacobsen's work for it to be considered as definitive or even representing the Star Gate program.

While there are many books available on the Star Gate program, none of them claim to be the "definitive" work, as most are first-person perspectives of the participants in the program. So why does Jacobsen's work deserve an open critique? The faux story narrated in her work has led to a concerted effort to bring to the reader the many errors in the book. These critiques counter the claim of *Phenomena* being a "definitive" work on the SRI–SAIC Star Gate program.

But first, let me introduce myself. I am Dr. Sonali Bhatt Marwaha, research associate with the Laboratories for Fundamental Research (LFR), Palo Alto, California. The LFR inherited the psi research begun at SRI, SRI-International (1972–1990), and SAIC (1991–1995), and is actively involved in continuing the research to date. One of our current projects is archiving the Star Gate research from 1972–1995. This four-volume effort is due to be released shortly as: *The Star Gate Archives: Reports of the United States Government Sponsored PSI Program* (*1972–1995*) (May & Marwaha 2017).

As the co-editor of the *Star Gate Archives,* along with Dr. Edwin C. May, and co-author on several theoretical and experimental papers in this area, I am in a unique position of having reviewed *all* the U.S. government documents in English, originally released in 2000 and thereafter, on their support and involvement in psi research. I can confidently state that I am the *only* person so far to have reviewed the *complete* set of documents released by the CIA, including those in the possession of LFR. This provides me a unique position to comment with authority on Annie Jacobsen's *Phenomena.*

Jacobsen may claim that this book is not *only* about the Star Gate program. As she states in her prologue (p. 5, Kindle Edition)

> . . . . the U.S. government determined anomalous mental phenomena to be effective military and intelligence tools, and began to investigate their possible use in classified operations. This book tells the story of this postwar endeavor and its continuation into the modern era.

However, it is important to note that the post-war story of psi involves several laboratories such as the Duke University parapsychology effort, Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man (FRNM, now known as the Rhine Research Center), the American Society for Psychical Research, the Maimonides Medical Center, and later the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Lab, and other independent researchers. Andrija Puharich and Edgar Mitchell—the protagonists in *Phenomena*—were not the movers and shakers of the era. Several of the others who are a focus in the book were either not key or marginal players, but were just bystanders. The bystander stories are just their personal interests and not part of any psi research nor were they funded by the government.

Jacobsen states that "To research and report this book I interviewed fifty-five scientists and psychics who worked on government programs, including the core members of the original group from Stanford Research Institute and the CIA, the core group on the military side, defense scientists, former military intelligence officers and government psychics, physicists, biologists, neurophysiologists, cyberneticists, astrophysicists, a general, an admiral, a Nobel Laureate, and an Apollo astronaut" (pp. 7–8). In the section on *List of Interviews and Written Correspondence*, Jacobsen provides a list of 49 persons whom she claims to have interviewed. Of these 49, only about 13 were associated with the program at various times for limited periods and involvement. The rest were probably not even aware of the existence of the program or the details of the program. Many names seem to have been included in the list for their name-dropping value. For instance, Noble Laurate Brian Josephson although associated with the psi research field, was not associated with the program in any manner nor aware of its details; others are not even associated with psi research in any manner: astrophysicist Eric W. Davis, NASA engineer Don Eyles, theoretical physicist Lawrence M. Krauss, physicists Richard Allen Miller, and well-known new-age guru Deepak Chopra. Deepak Chopra, for instance, was not even interviewed by Jacobsen (Personal email communication, 2017, quoted with permission). This casts a grave shadow on the authenticity of this book.

A critique against the critique of *Phenomena* is that the book does not refer to the Star Gate program alone. However, Jacobsen has stated:

> The real action began in 1972, when a small group of promising young scientists was approached by the Central Intelligence Agency to embark upon a research program involving psychics, or "sensitives." The work took

place at Stanford Research Institute, the second-largest Defense Department–

funded independent research facility in the nation. (p. 5)

Jacobsen's book is *clearly* about the Star Gate program— the only sustained government-funded applied and basic psi research program (1972– 1995). Nevertheless, there are several prominent members of the psi research community who have sought to support this faux investigative work, despite not being associated with the program nor being aware of the full nature of the program. Some see this work by a "Pulitzer nominated" journalist as an impetus to bringing psi research into mainstream focus and to increasing its approval ratings and therefore they support the work, even though it is riddled with errors. However, as the book reveals, Jacobsen perpetuates the myth of psi research as a fringe "woo-woo" science, and does great disservice, to put it mildly, to the science of psi, and the serious psi researchers from a variety of academic disciplines who have made substantial progress in understanding the phenomena. The book is a travesty on the life's work of several scientists involved in serious psi research.

On the impassioned recommendation of the well-known anthropologist Margaret Mead, the Parapsychological Association became an affiliate member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1969. This important aspect on research parapsychology is missing in Jacobsen's work.

I quite understand the reasons behind the lay public's excitement and enthusiasm over Jacobsen's work, after all it is well written in a breezy thriller format, it has a conspiracy element of hiding from public view "what the government knows but is hiding from us" manner.

In the following, I will address the shortcomings of Jacobsen's work in the same order as they appear in the book. These will discredit Jacobsen's claim of "research" and "investigation" in the making of this unfortunate book.

Part I: The Early Days

Chapter One: The Supernatural

To begin, the term "Supernatural" is a rather outmoded term to describe psi research. That said, the existence and study of psi phenomena can be traced back to ancient times from Egypt, to India, to Greece, to the setting up of the Society for Psychical Research in London in 1882, to the establishment of the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University in the early 1930s by Dr. Joseph Banks Rhine—widely acknowledged as the founder of modern scientific psi research. Incidentally, in her work she refers to J. B. Rhine as "James Bank "J. B." Rhine," (p. 41).

The military use of psi can be traced back to the shamans of yore, across the ancient world. A detailed account of this can be found in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of *ESP Wars, East and West: An Account of the Military Use of Psychic Espionage as Narrated by the Key Russian and American Players* (May et al. 2015).

Jacobsen begins her work with the Hess–Hitler–Nazi interest in psi. While some aspects of this may be appropriate in a historical context, they are in *no way* related to the U.S. government–sponsored psi research program beginning in 1972 at Stanford Research Institute, and closing at Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) in 1995. Jacobsen's references to sorcery, hallucinogenic drugs, and mushrooms, "God's flesh," MKULTRA, were simply *not a part of the SRI program.* Thus, Chapter 1 is a total error in a book that claims to be a "definitive history of the military's decades-long investigation into mental powers and phenomena."

Chapter Two: The Puharich Theory

Aside from being one of several psi researchers of his time, Andrija Puharich was in *no way related to or associated with the Star Gate program*. Moreover, his experimental and theoretical approaches were *not* followed by the SRI team. References to his work in the SRI documents occur in the same manner as would normally happen in the literature review of any scientific work; there is *no* focus on Puharich's approach. Thus Jacobsen's extensive focus on Puharich throughout the book is a gross error and misrepresentation of the SRI–SAIC work.

The theoretical approach of the SRI–SAIC work is distinctly different from that of other laboratories engaged in psi research. It followed a physicalist, signal-based approach to the investigation and understanding of psi. Telepathy, quantum mechanics, spirituality, consciousness, astral traveling, UFO, aliens, "staring at goats" have *never* been a part of the SRI–SAIC approach.

Chapter Three: Skeptics, Charlatans, and the U.S. Army

This chapter is a total waste. As the Star Gate program was a classified program, skeptics as well as researchers from the extended psi research community were not aware of the existence and/or details of the program. SRI papers published in *Nature* and in *Proceedings of the IEEE* presented a thin slice of the research effort, devoid of any classified material, or links to the sponsors. The reviewers of the program over the years were privy to only *some* of the unclassified documents.

Chapter Four: Quasi Science

In this chapter Jacobsen continues her focus on Puharich, the Round Table Foundation, "magic mushroom," MKULTRA. As noted above, these are *not* related to the Star Gate program. The only thing this chapter does is to paint all serious psi research with the pseudoscience brush. Considering the advances psi research has made in methodology, statistics, and theory, it is a shame that this representation of the field is encouraged.

Chapter Five: The Soviet Threat

Finally, in Chapter Five, Jacobsen addresses some parts of the reasons for the U.S. government interest in psi research. However, here too she focuses on peripheral issues rather than on the issues of Soviet psychology or parapsychological research. At best, this chapter gives a breezy overview of the Soviet effort.

Part II: The CIA Years

Chapter Six: The Enigma of Uri Geller

The less said about this subject the better. And, factually, there is not much to say about Uri Geller, as he was involved in *only one* series of experiments and visited the SRI laboratory for only 6 weeks in 1972. Jacobsen has grossly erred in focusing on Geller in this supposedly "definitive" work. To reiterate, Geller *was not a participant in the 22 years of the SRI–SAIC program aside from his six-week participation.* The only part that is true is the link between Puharich and Geller, and the CIA having introduced him to Targ and Puthoff. Moreover, there is documented evidence that the CIA did *not* want any further work with him other than the six weeks of work done, as they perceived him a security threat because he was a self-promoter and hence a security nightmare for a classified program. This view of Geller has been borne out with the extensive self-promotion and grossly exaggerated role that Geller has accorded to himself vis-à-vis the program, as is evident from his numerous writings, public presentations, media appearances, all of which can be found on his website (www.urigeller.com).

Chapter Seven: The Man on the Moon

While the story of Edgar Mitchell is interesting because of his many achievements, primarily as one of the astronauts to have walked on the moon, Mitchell was *not* associated with the Star Gate program. The psi research community is a small one, and it is inevitable that researchers and interested parties know each other. But that does *not* imply that they were participants in each other's work. As far as psi research is concerned, Edgar Mitchell's contribution is the establishment of the Institute for Noetic Sciences (IONS) in California; the approach of IONS is primarily a consciousness-based spiritual science.

This is in sharp contrast to the SRI–SAIC approach. While Jacobsen may not realize and value these differences, they are of critical importance in the trajectory of research and theory in understanding psi phenomena. The SRI–SAIC approach has led to several theoretical advances in understanding psi.

Chapter Eight: The Physicist and the Psychic

Hal Puthoff was one of the founders of the SRI psi program, along with Russell Targ—who is quite ignored in this book. He initiated the program at SRI in 1972, and resigned in 1985 to pursue his interests in theoretical physics. Russ Targ was a part of the program from 1972–1982.

As a historical narrative, it may be interesting to mention the connection between Cleve Backster, Puthoff, and Ingo Swann, as it brought Puthoff and Swann together. However, it is important to note that Backster's research interests were *not* a part of the Star Gate program. Backster's work is not even a part of psi research in general.

This chapter focuses on just the initial meeting of Puthoff and Swann, ignoring Swann's contribution and participation until 1986, when he left the program. Moreover, the extensive work of Puthoff, from 1972 to 1985, is ignored.

Chapter Nine: Skeptics versus CIA

In the narrative approach taken in *Phenomena*, this chapter may be the only one, so far, that gives some indication of the beginnings of the 22-year research program. This is a very thin slice, but an interesting one.

As in the other chapters so far, the absence of links to the notes (in the Kindle version) makes it diffi cult to determine the sources, hence the authenticity.

Chapter Ten: Remote Viewing

Finally, in Chapter Ten, after having traveled over unnecessary territory, Jacobsen reaches some aspects of the SRI program. Since this is mostly a he said–she said narrative, one has to take at face value what is attributed to the various players in the chapter. By and large, it is a brief narration of events in the early years of the program.

Chapter Eleven: The Unconscious

More on Uri Geller. I don't really understand the purpose of this chapter. Considering the content of this chapter, why it is called "The Unconscious" is a mystery to me.

Chapter Twelve: Submarines

In this chapter, too, Jacobsen goes over a mish-mash of ideas that are either unrelated to the program or formed one element/experiment of the program. While Puthoff and Targ participated along with Stephan Schwartz in Project Deep Quest, much of the SRI part of the program was classifi ed. Schwartz was not privy to this aspect of the program which essentially was addressing a theoretical aspect of the phenomena. Other key members on the team, including Dr. Edwin C. May, are not covered in Jacobsen's narrative.

By 1977, the period to which this chapter refers, the SRI program was on its way, despite several ups and downs. Some interesting research was under way, with Dr. Edwin C. May having joined the program in 1976. Several key research areas in applied remote viewing were under way, and the upper echelons of the U.S. government and intelligence communities were read into the program.

The problem with Jacobsen's writing is that she has failed to independently source her material, with the standard journalistic practice of having multiple independent sources.

On page 200 (Kindle edition), Jacobsen states:

> Graff urged his superiors to fund a classifi ed program with the SRI scientists that would focus on remote viewing research with special emphasis on locating lost airplanes. Several months later Graff got his answer: funding had been approved. Graff could not have foreseen that his initial eff ort would turn into a colossal, twenty-year eff ort by the Defense . . .

Dale Graff, of the Foreign Technology Division, was one of the members on the Grill Flame Committee (1980–1982), and later manager of the Fort Meade division of the applied program, (1990–1993). He was *not* a

scientist on the program. The main scientists on board were Hal Puthoff, Russ Targ, and Ed May, in addition to other SRI and SAIC associates of the program. There were several others up the command chain instrumental in program funding and decision making, higher than Dale Graff, with whom the SRI team was in contact with and for whom they worked.

Part III: The Defense Department Years

Chapter Thirteen: Paraphysics

The term 'paraphysics' in the title is quite a misnomer as far as the subject matter and contents of this chapter are concerned. The role of Dale Graff in the overall scheme of affairs would be akin to the role of a copyeditor in the production process; higher above is the author, the publisher, the acquisitions editor, and the editorial group. Much of this chapter is related to Graff's personal story and his interpretation of the phenomena being studied. The SRI–SAIC work does not refer to consciousness, Jung's collective unconscious and such, as does Graff's interpretation of the phenomena as narrated by Jacobsen.

In this chapter she also mentions the MX missile system and remote viewing. While Graff may have participated in brainstorming sessions for this project, the scientists behind this effort were Ed May and Hal Puthoff. They are listed as the authors on the documents associated with this effort.

As an aside, it is important to note another oversight by Jacobsen: She uses the term "anomalous mental phenomenon" from page 5 onward. However, she fails to note that this new terminology (now widely accepted) for psi phenomena was developed by Drs. Ed May, Jessica Utts, and S. J. P. Spottiswoode at SAIC. Incidentally, Professor Jessica Utts, a visiting scientist at SRI, a key member of the Blue Ribbon Panel set up by the CIA to assess the program, and President of the American Statistical Association (in 2016), is not mentioned in this book. The absence of these three is rather strange since their work related to the Star Gate program is available online, in peer reviewed literature, and reproduced/referenced in several publications.

Chapter Fourteen: Psychic Soldiers

This chapter gives the impression that the Fort Meade effort was independent of the SRI effort, when in fact it was a concerted effort under the command of the higher ups and SRI. There are several errors in the story about Joe McMoneagle, which I leave to him to address. The rest of the chapter is a dramatization of some of the sessions at Fort Meade.

Chapter Fifteen: Qigong and the Mystery of H. S. Tsien

While this chapter starts off as a review of Chinese psi investigation, Jacobsen slips back to Geller and his spoon bending efforts, with reference to strangers such as Jack Houck, who had nothing to do with the program, aside from their personal interest in psychokinesis (PK) and participation in the psi fads of the time in California. By 1981, the period referred to in this chapter, the SRI team, including Ed May, had started several psychokinesis experiments. Eventually, they rejected the PK hypothesis, based on the Intuitive Data Sorting Model; now known as Decision Augmentation Theory, it has been applied to several databases, rejecting the PK hypothesis.

Chapter Sixteen: Killers and Kidnappers

This chapter focuses on Dale Graff's experience at Fort Meade (1990– 1993), along with some examples of operational remote viewing. It is mixed with either Jacobsen's own interpretations or those of the members at Fort Meade, along with other extraneous unrelated issues.

Chapter Seventeen: Consciousness

The term "consciousness" in a book on the Star Gate program is in itself a big error. As noted earlier, the program did *not* have consciousness as a basis for understanding psi phenomena.

In the opening paragraph of this chapter Jacobsen refers to a U.S. Army publication "The New Mental Battlefi eld: Beam Me Up Spock" by U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel John B. Alexander. Neither the article nor the author are related to the program in any manner. As Jacobsen states:

> Alexander was not yet part of the Grill Flame program, nor did he have access to information about any of the CIA, DIA, or Army projects involving ESP and PK, now also being called remote action (RA) and remote perturbation (RP). Alexander's article was based on personal experience and opensource information, material found in books and articles in the public domain. . . . (p. 277, Kindle Edition)

Now why Jacobsen chose to include his perspective in this work is again a mystery to me.

The space given to Bob Monroe is also unfortunate, as he was involved in only one project (nickname Gondola Wish), in an effort that did not lead to scientifi c validity. The salacious references to Monroe are particularly disgusting, and their validity highly suspect.

Jacobsen again slips back to Geller and James Randi, who as stated, had nothing to do with the program. Randi has not even commented on the Star Gate program elsewhere.

This entire chapter is based primarily on people and events not associated with the program.

Chapter Eighteen: Psychic Training

This chapter refers to Dale Graff and Paul Smith. Smith was one of the remote viewers at Fort Meade from September 1983 to August 1990. Although he has written extensively about his experience, they were not associated with the higher levels of the program or involved in the SRI scientifi c effort. The issues that the Fort Meade group talks about are just their chatting. To put it differently, in any experiment or application, the participants in the program are the least aware of the nature of the scientifi c problem and the issues being examined. It is like asking persons in a drug trial their understanding of the chemical components and mode of action of a drug and what the scientists are looking for.

Chapter Nineteen: The Woman with the Third Eye

Jacobsen shifts to one of the most pathetic parts of the book: her story on Angela Dellafi ora. Although she has interviewed Angela, much of the writing in this chapter and the previous one is taken from the work of others, who had an axe to grind.

The references to remote viewing are described with very poor protocols that will bring the skeptical community down on psi research. Having checked the examples that are referred to here, it was apparent to me that these were trial sessions. While this may not matter to Jacobsen, it is of crucial importance to the scientifi c effort behind the program.

There is much richness in the operational part of the program vis-à-vis the phenomenon, which Jacobsen has entirely missed. To be able to write it up effectively, she would fi rst need to grasp the nature of the problem, which she clearly hasn't.

Chapter Twenty: The End of an Era

In this Chapter Jacobsen shifts back to Ed Mitchell and Uri Geller. Why?
She also brings up Randi again. Why?

On pages 337–338, Jacobsen states:

> Declassifi ed documents reveal that in the winter of 1987, Dames tasked remote viewers to dozens of sites of celebrated UFO encounters and alien abductions. Paul Smith reports that many in the unit were "fed up with Ed Dames' shenanigans and chafed at his parade of extraterrestrial targets," but offi cial documents indicate that his folly seems to have had a Pied Piper eff ect on others in the unit, with many viewers following his lead. This is evident in hundreds of pages of declassifi ed operations logs.

Why pay attention to what some low-level participants did in their spare time, when there is so much richness in the real effort? Having personally gone through the operations data logs, I don't fi nd these items.

Chapter Twenty One: Hostages and Drugs

This chapter again refers to participants such as Ed Dames, Paul Smith, and David Morehouse. While some operational remote viewings are narrated, the real story is hidden in a few paragraphs.

Chapter Twenty Two: Downfall

The chapter begins with 1991, when the project shifted from SRI to Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC). That is a story to tell, which has been completely missed in favor of Ed Dames and Morehouse.
Moreover, she ends the chapter with Puharich again.

Part IV: The Modern Era

Chapter Twenty Three: Intuition, Premonition, and Synthetic Telepathy

This chapter is a sorry representation of the Star Gate program. The data from this program has led to several advances in the fi eld of psi research which Jacobsen has no clue about.

Chapters Twenty Four: The Scientists and the Skeptics

Here she again focuses on fringe aspects, including areas that are not related to the phenomena under study.

Chapter Twenty Five: The Psychic and the Skeptic

Uri Geller and Edgar Mitchell resurface in the fi nal chapter.

This is a very poorly researched book, even in comparison with the wiki page on the Star Gate Project, which is largely inaccurate. This does not speak well for a Pulitzer nominated "investigative" reporter.

There is a fi ne story to tell about this 23-year program which the author has missed in its entirety. She has based her "defi nitive" work on a few people who say they were "there" or who are otherwise interesting characters to throw into a book, rather than on those intimately involved with and leading the program.

The number of inaccuracies in this book casts a grave shadow over her other works. A reading of the critical reviews by experts of her other books clearly shows that Jacobsen's investigative skills are limited, and that she has made a habit of misrepresenting the life's work of serious researchers. Some of the glaring omissions in this book include:

(1) ignoring the science behind the program—the successes, failures, and limitations of psi,
(2) not including an account of the program at SRI and later at SAIC,
(3) not taking into account, or even mentioning, Dr. Edwin C. May (SRI/SAIC 1976–1995, program director 1986–1995) and others, who were behind the bulk of the scientifi c research. Ironically, as mentioned earlier, she consistently uses the term "anomalous mental phenomena," but fails to mention those responsible for this terminology (Ed May, Jessica Utts, James Spottiswoode). Moreover, May was one of three people interviewed on the *Nightline* program in 1995—with former CIA director Robert Gates, and a CIA operative only identifi ed as 'Norm.'

These points are enough to disqualify Jacobsen's work as a well-researched, "defi nitive work" on a program that has led to several advances in understanding precognition/remote viewing and micro-PK. Briefl y, the Star Gate program—applied and basic research—concluded that psi is an inherent ability and cannot be developed, remote viewing is real and can be applied, and the evidence for psychokinesis is statistically weak. The program has led to several testable theories, some of which have been and are being put to the test, and this is a science in progress.

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